

# We are lonely, but not alone

How young people are beating  
loneliness, and what we can all  
do to help



Foundation

"If a friend is lonely, I'd be able to tell the difference. I'd chat with them regularly and ask them why they're feeling lonely. They're your friend after all."

Lara  
Stoke



Drama rehearsals at Through Unity, East London

"I feel if someone told me that they were lonely, like I'd like the fact that they'd confided in me ... I'd feel like I'm doing something right."

Susie  
Greater Manchester



Young person at Edward's Trust, Birmingham

"If a friend is reaching out to you it's not about you. You need to be there for your friend the same way they would maybe be there for you."

Aaron  
Bristol



A Whizz Kidz away day, Manchester



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**“Self-help on its own is not enough. We also need to show young people our solidarity.”**

## Introduction

One Sunday afternoon a few months ago, I navigated through Manchester back-alleys to a small studio at the top of an old warehouse. A group of young people were wrapping up an intensive week of work for which they'd given up time from their Easter break. We'd asked them to help us solve one of the trickiest problems we've encountered in the three years that the Co-op Foundation has been tackling youth loneliness. If most young people feel lonely at times - as our research shows they do - then why are they so reluctant to talk about it?

I was excited by what I might hear from this group, but had no idea what to expect. When I walked into the room, I was handed a pair of yellow socks. I definitely wasn't expecting that! Over the next few hours, all sitting together in our socks, they talked me through the insights they'd drawn from their own experiences of loneliness, and the creative process that had helped them turn these insights into a simple but powerful campaign concept. I learned as much that afternoon about youth loneliness, and about the often overlooked wisdom of young people, as I had done in the previous three years.

'Lonely Not Alone' is the campaign that grew from those young people's wisdom and creativity. And our new research shows just how important its message is. Showing we care that young people feel lonely is vital if

we want them to be more confident to open up, and to ask for help when they need it.

Young people are trying their best to beat loneliness. In fact, our research found that they exemplify a spirit of self-help, one of the co-operative values that we see as an essential foundation for strong communities. But self-help on its own is not enough. We also need to show young people our solidarity. By doing so, we can help them to unlock all the sources of support that could make things better when they feel lonely.

We are grateful to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for co-funding this research and the development of 'Lonely Not Alone', which complements the wider 'Let's Talk Loneliness' campaign. Thanks also to Effervescent, whose co-design expertise brought our young creatives' vision to life, and to our campaign steering group who helped us test and refine their initial concept. Most of all, I would like to thank the young people who gave up their time and shared their personal, sometimes painful experiences, to help us work together to make things better for young people across the UK.

**Jim Cooke**  
**Head of the Co-op Foundation**  
September 2019



## Let's talk loneliness

### Loneliness is one of the most pressing public health issues of our time

Like everyone reading this report, I have experienced times where I have felt lonely and know how frightening that can be. For some, it can just be a passing phase, but for others, it can be more long-term and lead to poor mental and physical health, with its impact in line with smoking or obesity.

That is why this Government's work in tackling loneliness is so important. Building upon the powerful and pioneering work started by the late Jo Cox MP, and carried on in her name by the Jo Cox Commission for Loneliness, we have become the first country to appoint a Minister for Loneliness and, in October 2018, set out an ambitious action plan to address loneliness across the country.

One commitment was to deliver a national campaign to tackle the stigma and create opportunities for people to connect. This led to 'Let's Talk Loneliness' being launched in June 2019, backed by charities, business and across government.

I very much welcome the Co-op Foundation's report on youth loneliness and the accompanying campaign, 'Lonely Not Alone', which supports the Government's work.

Research shows that our young people, in particular, are experiencing loneliness in striking numbers. Therefore it is vital that we equip them with the tools to recognise and talk about the times in life when they feel isolated, and build resilience for now and the future, should there be other lonely moments in their lives. Only then will the shame of loneliness diminish.

Our young people deserve a future where social health - the level of connection that is right for them - has as much prominence and status as physical health. And where the inevitable upheavals that we all face are met with understanding and support, not just from friends and family but from schools, colleges and workplaces, too.

If we work together to act upon the findings of this report, and show young people that youth loneliness matters, we will start to build a more caring, socially aware society where periods of loneliness are fleeting rather than permanent.

I hope everyone will support this campaign and wear a pair of yellow socks to show young people that although they feel lonely, they are not alone.

**Baroness Barran**  
**Minister for Civil Society**  
September 2019

## Executive summary

“The majority of young people would be comfortable helping others their age who may be lonely.”

Loneliness can affect anyone, and previous research has shown that young people say they feel lonely more often than any other age group.

Through our UK-wide Belong network of youth projects, we've seen thousands of inspiring young people take action to beat loneliness. Our new research aimed to find out more about how young people are responding to loneliness to help themselves and their peers. We also hoped to discover how people of all ages might be able to help young people feel more confident opening up about loneliness.

We found that most young people show a self-help spirit when it comes to tackling loneliness. Those who had ever felt lonely had used, on average, two to three different techniques to address this. Almost three-quarters of all young people had found at least one way of responding to loneliness that was helpful.

This self-help approach has limitations though. We found a mis-match between the approaches most widely tried by young people and those which were most likely to be effective. The most lonely young people, who may lack existing support networks from family or friends, face particular challenges. This highlights the importance of young people drawing from a wide tool-box of techniques to respond to loneliness, and the need for more support from other sources.

The majority of young people would be comfortable helping others their age who may be lonely. Most had either supported a friend or shown kindness to someone in their wider peer group who they thought was lonely.

However, peer support remains an under-used resource. We estimate that there are **1.7million** young people who would be willing to help their peers tackle loneliness, but have not yet done so. More community initiatives to tackle youth loneliness could also give those who are already helping each other in their day-to-day interactions the opportunity to build on this and help even more young people.

Opening up continues to be a challenge, with just one in four young people feeling confident talking about loneliness and fewer than one in three saying they would feel comfortable asking for help if they felt lonely. Perceptions that youth loneliness is not taken seriously by society may contribute to this issue. More visible solidarity with young people, combined with their existing self-help spirit, will be vital to beat youth loneliness.

Young people worked alongside creative professionals to co-design 'Lonely Not Alone', a new campaign, which aims to help young people open up about loneliness, and offers everyone a simple way to show they care.



## Key findings

### Young people are taking action to beat loneliness



**74%**

have taken at least one action that helped with their own feelings of loneliness

**3**

average different types of self-help response tried by the most lonely young people

**73%**

have taken at least one action to help other young people who might be lonely

### More peer support is both needed and possible



**20%**

of the most lonely young people who took action in response to their own loneliness found that nothing they tried was helpful

**'Wait for the feeling to pass'**

young people's most widely tried response to loneliness, but the least likely to help

**Estimated 1.7m**

young people would be comfortable helping their peers to beat loneliness, but have not yet done so

### Opening up about loneliness is still a challenge



**Only 26%**

of young people feel confident talking about loneliness

**23%**

of young people believe youth loneliness is treated as a serious social issue

**31%**

of young people said they would be comfortable asking for help if they felt lonely

**65%** of young people agree that loneliness is a problem for their age group

**£6.5m** awarded to Belong projects UK-wide

**25,000** young people will take part in Belong projects by 2021



## Our work so far

Loneliness is the feeling we get when we have fewer, or less meaningful relationships with others than we would like<sup>1</sup>. Young people say they feel lonely more often than any other age group<sup>2</sup> and 65% of them agree that loneliness is a problem for people their age<sup>3</sup>.

In 2017, we launched Belong, our UK-wide programme to help young people beat loneliness. This built on Co-op's campaign to tackle loneliness in partnership with the British Red Cross. By 2021, Belong aims to:

- Connect and empower 7,500 young people, helping them improve their relationships, sense of community, confidence and skills
- Strengthen local youth services that provide vital support and opportunities
- Engage at least 25,000 young people in a national conversation that breaks down the stigma of loneliness.

We've awarded a total of £6.5million in grants to Belong projects UK-wide. We've been supported in this through our partnerships with the #iwill Fund - helping young people tackle loneliness through social action - and government, who are working with us to deliver some of the commitments in their loneliness strategy<sup>4</sup>. This includes the Youth strand of the Building Connections Fund.

### Case study

Evie took part in a project with our Belong partner, Off The Record (Bristol), which was supported by our #iwill Fund.

**"I've felt such a big difference since getting involved with Off The Record. They understand me. Leaving the house might seem like a small thing to do but getting out and about is life changing when you've never had the confidence to do it."**

Belong has already begun a national conversation about youth loneliness, involving young people and those who work with them to understand more about its causes, impact and possible solutions. This new research and the launch of 'Lonely Not Alone' mark the next stage of this work.

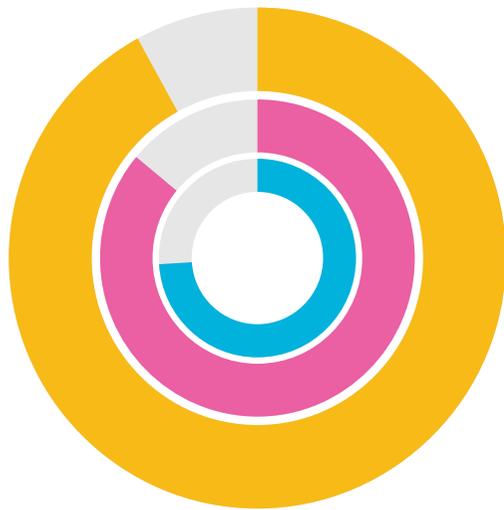
<sup>1</sup>A commonly used definition of loneliness is as "a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want." D. Perlman and L.A. Peplau (1981)

<sup>2</sup>Co-op/British Red Cross (2016), see [coop.co.uk/loneliness](http://coop.co.uk/loneliness)

<sup>3</sup>All Our Emotions Are Important, Co-op Foundation (2018) <http://www.coopfoundation.org.uk/youth/all-our-emotions-research/>

<sup>4</sup>A Connected Society - [www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-connected-society-a-strategy-for-tackling-loneliness](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/a-connected-society-a-strategy-for-tackling-loneliness)

## All young people



**92%** of young people say they ever feel lonely

**86%** have taken any type of action in response to feeling lonely

**74%** have found any of these actions helpful

## The most lonely young people

**3** average different types of self-help action taken by the most lonely young people

**80%** found at least one action helpful

# How do young people respond to loneliness?

## Resourceful young people reveal their self-help spirit

### “Who isn’t lonely at some point?”

Dylan, Manchester

Most people feel lonely at some point, and young people are no exception. In our survey, only **8%** of 10 to 25-year-olds said they never felt lonely.

For most, loneliness is an occasional experience, while for others it’s a regular or constant feeling.

However rarely or frequently it affects them, our research found the majority of young people to be resourceful and resilient, drawing on a variety of self-help strategies when they do feel lonely. **86%** of all young people said they had taken at least one action to manage their own feelings of loneliness.

The range of techniques used by young people include adjusting how they use their time and who they spend it with, changing their own mindset to try and see things more positively, and in some cases opening up to others about their feelings.

More often than not, these self-help responses to loneliness had a positive effect for those who tried them. Nearly three-quarters (**74%**) of all young people had taken at least one action that they found to be helpful. Almost half (**48%**) had found ways of responding to loneliness which they said ‘helped a lot’.

Even young people who said they were hardly ever lonely had used an average of two different techniques to respond to loneliness when it had affected them.

Those who felt lonely the most often had tried an average of three techniques.

Despite this self-help spirit, the most lonely young people are more likely to struggle to find solutions that work for them. Nearly one in ten (**9%**) of the most lonely young people who had tried some kind of self-help response to loneliness found that these actions actually made things worse.

Our findings suggest that, although young people’s efforts to take responsibility for finding their own solutions to loneliness are largely beneficial, the specific self-help approaches some of them are using may not always be suitable or sufficient.

To find out why their efforts to beat loneliness were producing these mixed results, particularly for the most lonely young people, we looked in closer detail at the different types of action young people had taken, and how helpful these tended to be.

## Case study

Sara\*, 20, from north London, says loneliness is a “runaway feeling” that happens once or twice a week but then disappears.

**“Sometimes when I feel lonely I feel ‘trapped’ so I often just do my own thing. I might just go in my room and play [computer games] and that helps to brush it away. In certain situations I might just help my nan cook instead ... or just be around people. I like socialising with people.”**

\*Not real name

## A tool-box of techniques

Young people are drawing from a wide-ranging tool-box of techniques for responding to their own feelings of loneliness. These include changing how they use their time, whether focusing on the quantity or the quality of time they spend on their own, with other people or online. Reinforcing the existing evidence that loneliness can be difficult to talk about, many young people are finding ways of dealing with loneliness 'internally', while a smaller proportion have tried opening up to others about their feelings, or seeking help with related issues.

All these different self-help responses to loneliness have been beneficial for a significant proportion of the young people who tried them, although some types of action are typically more helpful than others. There are also some significant differences between the loneliest young people and their less lonely peers, in terms of the actions they've tried and how helpful these were.

## Solving loneliness for themselves?

The two most widely tried responses to loneliness relate to how young people manage their own feelings. 'Waiting for the feeling to pass' had been tried by more than a third (36%) of young people who ever felt lonely, and half (50%) of the most lonely young people. This more passive approach to loneliness was the technique least likely to make a difference, although it was still found to be helpful by 47% of those who tried it.

A more effective approach was to 'try to see things in a more positive way', which was helpful for 75% of those who did this. Even more beneficial for those who tried it was to find ways of using their time alone more positively, such as by taking up a hobby they could do on their own. One in four (24%) young people had tried this approach, with 85% of this group saying they found it helpful.

## Strengthening relationships

Spending more time with family or friends had an overwhelmingly positive impact for those who did so. Almost all of the young people who had done this found it a helpful way of responding to loneliness, with the majority saying that it helped a lot.

However, this option depends on young people having an existing support network they can turn to. This may be why the most lonely young people were much less likely than their peers to have responded to loneliness in this way.

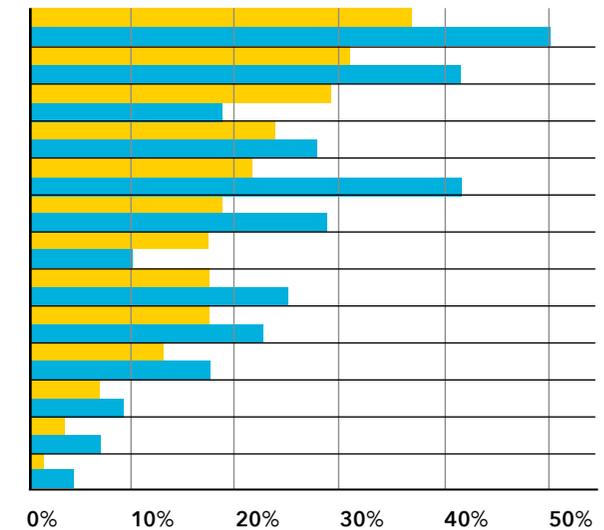
**"This year I'm definitely more settled than I ever was 'cause I found more friends. And I just feel like I'm more comfortable with them than I've ever been. They're like my blanket of safety."**

Lara, Stoke

Waited for the feeling to pass	36%	50%
Tried to see things in a more positive way	75%	47%
Spent more time with my family	47%	85%
Used time alone in a more positive way	24%	85%
Spent more time online	24%	85%
Spent less time with people who didn't make me feel good	24%	85%
Spent more time with friends	47%	85%
Tried to make new friends	25%	85%
Talked privately about how I was feeling with someone I trusted	24%	85%
Tried to spend time online in a more positive way	24%	85%
Spent less time online	24%	85%
Talked openly about how I was feeling in a group	24%	85%
Got in touch with a service to help with why I felt lonely	24%	85%

All ■ Most lonely ■

When I felt lonely, I...



Trying to make new friends was a more popular choice for the most lonely young people, with one in four (25%) of them having tried this option. Although efforts to form new friendships often paid off, it seems to be a less reliable approach than being able to turn to existing friends and family. Young people were more likely to find it helped 'a bit' than 'a lot' - and one in ten felt that it had actually made things worse.



## Digital connections?

Quality, rather than quantity, seems to be the key to young people beating loneliness through their digital lives.

Many young people had responded to loneliness by spending more time online. This was particularly common among the most lonely young people - **42%** of this group had tried this approach, compared to **23%** of all young people in our survey. Although this was often beneficial, being helpful for just over half (**52%**) of all those who had tried it, it had among the most mixed results of all the techniques our research explored. One in five (**20%**) of those who had increased their time online found it made things worse.

Far fewer young people (**6%**) had responded to loneliness by spending less time online, although those who did were more likely to find this helpful, compared to those who spent more time online.

Even more benefit was felt by those who tried to use their time online in a more positive way, such as using the internet to pursue their hobbies and interests, rather than simply adjusting the amount of time spent. This was one of the most reliable of all the responses to loneliness we explored, with **86%** who tried it seeing some benefit, and very few young people - just **1%** - feeling it made things worse.

## The challenge of opening up

Speaking about loneliness can be difficult, but one in six young people (**17%**) had managed to open up about how they were feeling in private with a trusted individual. A large majority (**86%**) of these young people saw positive results from taking this step.

Talking openly in a group setting was a much less common response, tried by **3%** of young people who ever felt lonely, and **6%** of the most lonely. This option produced more mixed results for those who did so. This may be a consequence of the stigma that continues to be associated with loneliness, and perhaps also indicates a lack of 'safe spaces' in which young people feel comfortable and supported to express their feelings.

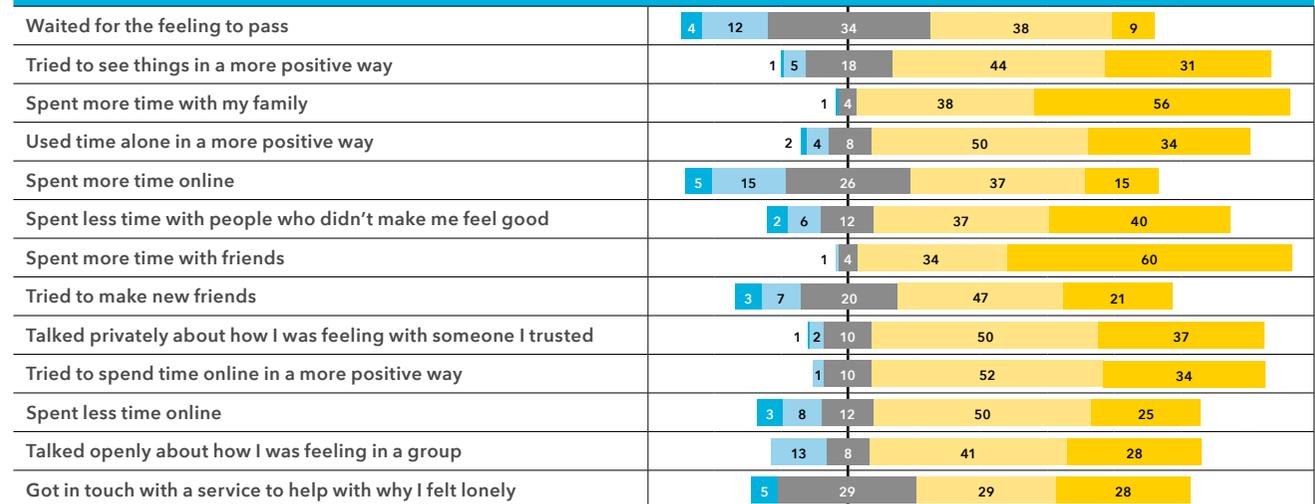
Just **1%** of all young people (and **4%** of the most lonely) said they had got in touch with a service to help address the reasons why they felt lonely. This may be a consequence of few youth services having explicitly acknowledged loneliness as an issue they can help with. With youth loneliness now rising up the agenda of youth organisations, policy-makers and funders, we may see this picture start to change over the coming years.

## Case study

Steven, 23, from Gateshead, is a young carer. His responsibilities at home means he is often unable to socialise with friends. He says that talking privately to someone he trusts, like a youth worker, is the best way to open up about his feelings and overcome loneliness.

**"I know that [the youth workers] will understand me and I know there's a good chance they can deal with those issues. Most of them will have some experience of what I'm going through and [speaking to them] is reassuring for me."**

### If you did this when you felt lonely, what impact did it have?



Base: all young people who had taken each action

■ Made it a lot worse %
 ■ Made it a bit worse %
 ■ Didn't make a difference %
 ■ Helped a bit %
 ■ Helped a lot %

## 'They're your friend, after all'

### Helping each other beat loneliness

# 73%

of young people have taken some action to help other young people who might be lonely

# 87%

of young people would be comfortable taking action to help other young people who might be lonely

Our previous research identified the potential importance of peer support for tackling youth loneliness\*. Our new survey asked young people about some of the ways in which many of them are already taking action to help tackle loneliness among their peer group.

Young people were most likely to feel comfortable supporting existing friends, and many of their actions to tackle loneliness were aimed at others in their immediate friendship groups. One in three (34%) had supported a friend who had told them they felt lonely, and almost

as many (32%) had offered support to a friend who they thought may be lonely.

Similar numbers of young people also showed themselves willing to extend their friendship beyond existing circles. 35% had included someone who seemed lonely in their friendship group, and 34% had been friendly to someone outside their friendship group who they thought may be lonely. This generosity with kindness and friendship could be crucial for tackling youth loneliness, given that the most lonely young people are less likely to have existing friends they can turn to.

**"[When I started at this school] I didn't know anybody at all 'cause I came from a different city. It was just the worst thing ever because I didn't know anyone. I didn't talk to anyone. I just isolated myself from everyone until [my friend] came along and she forced me to talk to her [...] that helped. If she wasn't there I wouldn't have talked to anyone."**

Sana, Stoke

### Untapped potential

We've seen that significant numbers of young people are helping to tackle loneliness among their peers through their everyday social interactions. Far fewer (8%) said they had got involved in their community to help other young people who might be lonely. With youth loneliness continuing to be an under-recognised issue, this may be because relatively few community activities explicitly focus on it.

However, with five times as many young people (40%) saying they would be comfortable helping others in this way, if more community programmes did focus on youth loneliness, they could potentially attract significant support and engagement from young people.

Across all the forms of peer support our survey explored, there is significant untapped potential for young people to turn their willingness to help others into action. Overall, 87% said they would be comfortable taking some sort of action to help other young people who might be lonely. It is encouraging that 73% said they had actually taken one or more of these actions, but this still leaves an estimated 1.7million 10 to 25-year-olds who would be open to helping their peers beat loneliness, but are yet to do so.

\*All Our Emotions Are Important, Co-op Foundation (2018)





## Case study

Lara is a Year 8 student at Co-op Academy Stoke. She says her own experience with loneliness means she would pro-actively try to help friends who she thought may feel lonely.

**“When I was in Year 7, I had a hard time settling in. I felt more pressure than I did in primary school and it was hard to start with. [So now], if a friend is lonely [I’d be] able to tell the difference. I’d chat with them regularly and ask why they’re feeling lonely. They’re your friend after all.”**

Lara also says she’d be comfortable including someone new in her friendship group if they seemed lonely.

**“If there was someone who didn’t have friends you can try to put them together so they can be friends and all feel like a group - it’s like a family.”**

## Case study

Kynan, 20, from the West Midlands, says supporting other young people who felt lonely also helped him.

**“The fear of being alone can affect your relationships but getting involved [in a peer support group] gives you an opportunity to make new friends. Spending time with people your own age is phenomenally important when you’re feeling lonely.**

**“Later on I was able to draw on my own experiences to help younger children who I knew would be experiencing loneliness. Watching them enjoy time with people their own age at social events helped me a lot, too. It helped me feel more confident.”**

### Actions to help others feel less lonely

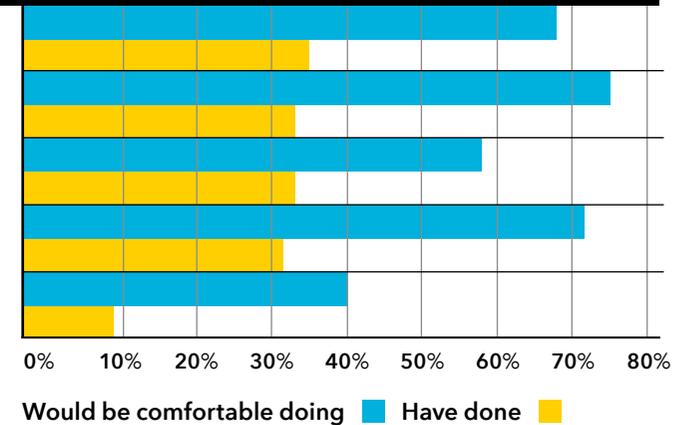
Including someone in your friendship group who seemed lonely

Supporting a friend who told you they felt lonely

Being friendly with someone outside of your friendship group who you think may be lonely

Offering support to a friend who you think may be lonely

Getting involved in your community to help other young people who might be lonely



Base: all young people

# 26%

of young people feel confident talking about loneliness

# 31%

of young people would be comfortable asking for help if they felt lonely

## 'You put on this mask so nobody can tell'

### Why is it so hard to talk about loneliness?

Young people find it difficult to talk about loneliness. Only **26%** of the 10 to 25 year-olds who took part in our survey agreed that loneliness is something they feel confident talking about, while **40%** disagreed.

However, young people are actually slightly more confident on this topic than they perceive their wider peer group to be. Just **18%** agreed that people their age feel confident talking about loneliness, with **51%** disagreeing.

This lack of confidence, both felt by young people and perceived in others, is likely to contribute to a

reluctance to ask for help when experiencing loneliness. Only **31%** said they would be comfortable asking for help if they felt lonely, while **45%** said they would feel uncomfortable doing so.

Those who are lonely the most often face even bigger barriers to asking for help. Of those who feel lonely often or always, just **23%** would feel comfortable asking for help and **67%** would feel uncomfortable.

Young people in our focus groups told us more about some of the barriers to opening up about loneliness and how these made them feel.

**"You feel like your mouth is taped up, like you can't spit it out."**

Molly, Stoke

**"You put on this mask that you always do so nobody can tell if there is something wrong."**

Amber, Gateshead



# 23%

of young people believe youth loneliness is treated as a serious social issue

**"It's a problem mainly for men, fear of being weak, they feel weak if they ask someone to help them."**

Hour, Manchester

**"You don't want to be a burden - you don't want to put that stress on someone else."**

Susie, Greater Manchester

**"You don't want to be a nuisance."**

Matthew, Gateshead

We have seen how young people are overwhelmingly open to helping their peers tackle loneliness, both within their immediate friendship groups and beyond, but that this potential source of support often goes under-used. If the barriers to talking about loneliness were reduced, this willingness to help others could be activated to a greater extent, complementing the wide range of self-help approaches young people are already using.

Perceptions of how youth loneliness is viewed by society as a whole may also play a part in making young people bottle up their feelings. Just **23%** of young people in our survey thought that loneliness among people their age is treated as a serious social issue. By contrast, over half (**53%**) agreed that loneliness among the elderly is treated as a serious issue.

If people of all ages showed that they recognised youth loneliness as a widespread and important issue, it could help young people view their own feelings as more legitimate. This may encourage young people to open up about loneliness, and help more of them benefit from all available sources of support. This includes drawing on the support of their peers, who our research suggests are ready and willing to help.

More visible solidarity from those who care about young people, combined with the self-help attitude which most of them are already showing, has the potential to provide a powerful set of tools to beat youth loneliness.





## Conclusions

### Young people are resourceful and resilient when it comes to tackling the loneliness that most feel from time to time.

Most of them have drawn from a range of self-help strategies when they've felt lonely. There is no one single solution: all of the many different ways young people try to beat loneliness tend to help to some extent. This highlights the importance of young people continuing to draw from a wide-ranging tool-box of techniques in response to loneliness.

However, the strategies that tend to be most effective are not those which are most often tried by young people. More open discussion of loneliness could raise young people's awareness of different potential responses and help them identify those that will work best for their own situation.

Some young people will face more significant barriers to beating loneliness, and a reliance on self-help solutions will not be enough. For example, spending more time with friends and family was the most beneficial response to feeling lonely, but may not be possible for some of the most lonely young people if they do not have good support networks already in place.

### This highlights the importance of complementing self-help approaches with support from other sources.

Peer support is an under-used source of potential help for tackling youth loneliness. Although most young people have taken some form of action to help peers who might be feeling lonely, our research suggests that they would be willing to do so to a far greater extent.

Young people's willingness to extend support beyond their existing friendship groups could be particularly important for helping those who are most lonely.

If more community-based youth programmes considered how they could explicitly tackle loneliness, they would potentially find a willing audience of young people open to volunteering or supporting in other ways. Learning from Building Connections Fund co-design projects, which worked with young people to explore how services and spaces could better tackle youth loneliness, has been published at <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/the-building-connections-fund/>

### It can be difficult to talk about loneliness, but we can all help to make it easier.

Young people tend to lack confidence talking about loneliness, which may contribute to the discomfort many of them feel with asking for help. This particularly affects those who are lonely the most often.

Perceptions that youth loneliness is not taken seriously by society as a whole may also contribute to young people's reluctance to open up about this issue. If more people of all ages show they care about youth loneliness, it will help young people know that although they may feel lonely, they are not alone.

**"Accepting [loneliness] is a reality could potentially go some way to alleviating [the stigma]."**

Dylan, Manchester



## 'We are lonely, but not alone'

### New youth-led campaign to help young people talk about loneliness

Throughout our work on **Belong**, we've encountered a persistent challenge. Although most young people feel lonely at times, few of them are confident talking about it.

We partnered with specialist youth co-design agency, Effervescent, to work with a group of young people to create a campaign that would help young people become more confident talking about loneliness, and more likely to take action to address it in themselves and others.

A group of nine 11 to 22-year-olds were chosen to lead the creative process. These young people had very different backgrounds and experiences of loneliness, but one thing connected them - they wanted to use their insights to help others.

#### How it began

Over the course of an intensive week of creative workshops, this group took part in a range of activities to engage with the challenge we'd set them. They built art installations, drew pictures and responded to music.

From this, they drew out the following insights about how it feels to be lonely as a young person.

**We think it's our fault.**

**We think it's probably going to last forever.**

**We put on a brave face and pretend it doesn't hurt.**

**There are thousands of us  
- we are all lonely, but not alone.**

The challenge was then to create a call to action that would show young people everywhere that no matter how lonely they felt, they were not alone. Lots of ideas were generated, but what our young creatives kept coming back to was that when they felt lonely, they looked to the floor because they didn't want to see other people's pity.

That was when the **'yellow socks'** concept was born.

By asking people to wear yellow socks, their campaign encourages people to show they care about youth loneliness. Socks are semi-hidden - just like young people's experiences of loneliness - but by wearing yellow socks we can all offer a 'ray of hope' that lonely young people will see when they look down.

lonely  
**NOT**  
**ALONE**



**“If this campaign helps someone be there for somebody else, then I’ve done a good thing. If I help someone not sit on their own at lunch every day, and not have to be alone all the time, then I will have done a good thing.”**

Finlay, aged 12  
Young creative

### Getting creative

After testing their initial concept with other young people through an online survey, our group spent the summer getting creative. They worked with professional lyricists to write a song that would explain their campaign’s message and helped to draw up animations of characters representing some of their different experiences of loneliness.

Everything you’ll see as part of 'Lonely Not Alone' has been inspired by and created with young people.

And now it’s over to you.

### Get involved

Take part in 'Lonely Not Alone' in three simple ways:

- Wear yellow socks to show you care about youth loneliness
- Post your 'yellow socks' picture to social media using **#LonelyNotAlone**
- Visit [lonelynotalone.org](https://lonelynotalone.org) to find out more about the campaign and the young people who created it.

Get involved when and where you like, because every time you do, you’ll be showing young people you care, and that youth loneliness matters.

Together, we can show young people that even if they feel lonely, they are not alone.

**“Taking part has allowed me to reflect on my childhood experiences of loneliness and understand how they continue to affect my life, even years later. So often young people are overlooked and I am thrilled to have worked on a campaign that encourages the voices of lonely young people to be heard.”**

Rosie, aged 21  
Young creative



## About the research

Unless otherwise stated, statistics used in this report refer to the Co-op Foundation/ICM youth loneliness survey 2019. Fieldwork was completed by ICM, the specialist social research division of Walnut. ICM interviewed a representative sample of 2,044 10 to 25-year-olds living in the UK. Fieldwork was conducted online between 27 February and 12 March 2019. To ensure a representative sample, during fieldwork demographic quotas were applied, and at the analysis stage data was weighted by age, gender, region.

We also ran six focus groups with 41 young people, in London, Manchester, Gateshead, Bury, Bristol and Stoke on Trent. Thank you to our partner organisations KIDS, The Proud Trust, Youth Focus: North East, Greater Manchester Youth Network, Off The Record (Bristol) and Co-op Academy Stoke and for your support.

## Measuring loneliness

For our survey, we used the national loneliness measure recommended by the Office for National Statistics. For more information, see <http://bit.ly/lonely-meas>

In this report, when we refer to the most lonely young people, this means those who answered 'often/always' when asked the direct question 'How often do you feel lonely?'. Young people were given the following options to choose from: 'often/always', 'some of the time', 'occasionally', 'hardly ever', or 'never'. 11% of the 10 to 25-year-olds who responded to our survey said they felt lonely 'often/always'.



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